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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001996

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [IR](#) [KISL](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: IRAN AND SYRIA ATTEMPT TO MAKE INROADS
INTO POVERTY-STRICKEN AKKAR REGION

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Christopher W. Murray. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On June 14, econoff and FSN political specialist made an official visit to Akkar, the poorest and northernmost district in Lebanon. Local religious and municipal leaders reported that Iran is attempting to support Sunni extremist views in the poverty-stricken region. Syria still maintains some influence with the Alawi minority in the area, but Akkar residents say Syrian influence dissipated after the Syrian troops withdrawal in 2005. The Akkar residents also reported that the mostly Sunni people of Akkar still owe their allegiance to Saad Hariri's Future Movement despite continued GOL neglect of the region. The Embassy delegation was warmly welcomed. The only signs of hostility were posters of Syrian President Bashar Asad newly plastered along the highway only a few kilometers from the Syrian border. A surprised mayor said this must have been the work of the small Alawi minority. In other meetings, Embassy contacts told us that Iran, through Hizballah, was actively supporting a Sunni extremist movement in Akkar. End summary.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

¶2. (SBU) On June 14, econoff and FSN political specialist visited Akkar, the poorest district in Lebanon, to meet with local religious and municipal leaders. Akkar, with a Sunni majority and Greek Orthodox minority, borders Syria. Driving through the villages of Akkar in the middle of the business day confirmed the poverty of the area. The roads, houses, and shops appeared shabby and old. There was little economic activity, as at least half of the storefronts remained shuttered at mid-morning. What shops were open had groups of men and boys milling around, drinking coffee and tea. The conservative nature of the area was evident in the fact that there were virtually no women or girls in public. What few women were out were dressed conservatively with their hair, but not face, covered. The Embassy delegation was warmly received at each stop.

IRAN IS KNOCKING...

¶3. (C) The first stop was the Sunni Endowments of Akkar, a religious and charitable association of moderate Sunni clerics. The president, Sheikh Malik Hedeide, told econoff

that Iran is trying to make inroads into Akkar by paying off local Sunni clerics to issue extremist, anti-Western statements and sermons. Hedeide's organization is trying to combat this growing extremism threat. He said that, to date, extremists in Akkar have made only limited progress. Membership in the Iranian-sponsored, Sunni extremist organization al-Tawhiid is so minimal in Akkar that "you can count their membership on one hand," asserted Hedeide with some poetic license. He continued that there are no armed Sunni militias in Akkar. Hedeide insisted that Americans are welcome in Akkar, and proved it by calling the press to have econoff's picture taken with him and his top clerics. Hedeide admitted that people are disappointed with what they see as a USG double standard in favor of Israel, but this does not translate into hatred of Americans.

¶4. (C) Hedeide said that the vast majority of clerics and Sunni residents in Akkar have resisted Iranian meddling. He said the vast majority of clerics and Sunni residents of Akkar remain loyal to Saad Hariri and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. This loyalty, Hedeide declared, in front of the press, was in spite of long-standing GOL neglect of Akkar, especially in the lack of agricultural assistance. Hedeide cited the example that Siniora canceled two meetings with a delegation of the mayors of Akkar and has not rescheduled them, while President Emile Lahoud is always ready to receive them. (Comment: The fact that Lahoud is so isolated and thus has a fairly open schedule may be lost on the residents of Akkar. End comment.)

...BUT THE GOL IS NOT

¶5. (C) A perceived sense of GOL neglect was a recurring theme in Akkar. Omar Hayek, the mayor of a small Sunni

BEIRUT 00001996 002 OF 003

village only a few kilometers from the Syrian border, said that all his village receives from the GOL is USD 10,000 a year. This stipend covers virtually none of the municipal expenses. There is no local secondary school, electricity and phone service is spotty, and there is no potable water. The village's septic tanks were installed right next to the only well in town. Now the citizens, mostly poor and unemployed, must buy bottled water for drinking and cooking. Hayek insisted, however, that despite the poverty, unemployment, GOL neglect, and proximity to Syria, the people are not extremist. A local cleric told us that he and other Sunni clerics owe their allegiance to Dar al-Fatwa, the mainstream, pro-Hariri Sunni religious organization headed by Mufti of the Republic Qabbani. We were widely and warmly received by much of the male population of the village, though this was unfortunately made possible by the fact that so many were unemployed.

¶6. (C) Another Akkar municipal leader, Fawaz Zakaria of Tell Humari, also said that the area seems all but forgotten by the GOL. He said that virtually no one has a regular job in his village (again allowing most of the male population to show up to greet the Embassy delegation). According to Zakaria, the average household income is USD 200 a month, which goes to support an average family size of nine people (two adults and seven children). He denied any extremist or armed activity in the area, but admitted that the poverty has led to a disturbing increase in street crime. Nonetheless, the 90 percent of the residents who are Sunni remain loyal to Hariri. The approximately ten percent of his village that is Alawi are suspected of keeping ties to Syria, Zakaria said. When econoff mentioned that the delegation's convoy passed by several newly plastered posters of Syrian President Bashar Asad on the way into the village, the surprised mayor at first denied it. After consulting with his police chief, Zakaria said that the village Alawis had plastered the posters to protest the Embassy delegation's visit, but he dismissed this sentiment as being in the minority.

¶17. (C/NF) The visit to Akkar on June 14 was at the invitation of Sheik Mohammad Fares, a moderate Sunni cleric close to Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Mouawad. Fares had approached econoff and FSN political specialist in May with alarming news of Iranian initiatives in Akkar. Fares said that Iran is funding, through Hizballah, the al-Tawhiid Movement as well as Palestinian extremists located in the Palestinian refugee camps outside of Tripoli. Iran and Hizballah "are throwing money" at the north, he said. Hizballah is offering Sunni clerics a stipend of up to USD 50,000 annually to work with them in increasing Sunni extremist sentiment in Akkar, according to Fares. Hizballah has also delivered small arms and rocket propelled grenade (RPG) launchers to al-Tawhiid, whose members receive rudimentary military training in Iran. Despite the Iranian money and support, al-Tawhiid enjoys very little popular support in Akkar and its membership is small in number, Fares said.

¶18. (C/NF) Fares said that no Iranian officials operate in Akkar, though there have been a few visits by the Iranian Embassy. Rather, the Iranian money and arms are disbursed by Hizballah officials. They are based out of several small Shia villages in the area. There are other Sunni extremist groups -- based on Wahabi and Salifi ideologies -- but they are small, disorganized, and would not work with Hizballah because they hate Shia Muslims. They receive funding from private donations from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, according to Fares. These Gulf-supported groups offer local sheikhs up to USD 5,000 annually to give anti-American, Sunni extremist sermons in their mosques. None of the Wahabi or Salifi groups maintain militias, according to Fares.

¶19. (C/NF) To verify Fares' information, econoff met separately with Abbas Sabbagh, a Shia journalist with good access to Hizballah. Sabbagh confirmed that Iran and Hizballah are making alliances with al-Tawhiid and other Sunni extremists in Akkar. He also confirmed that there are approximately two to three thousand Shia living in small villages in Akkar, which Hizballah can use as a base. Sabbagh said that Iranian and Hizballah efforts have thus far had a minimal impact on promoting Sunni extremism in the

BEIRUT 00001996 003 OF 003

north.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Public reaction to the Embassy visit was overwhelmingly positive, both in and out of Akkar. The Arabic language daily newspaper "An Nahar" ran an article with a picture showing econoff standing side by side with the clerics of the Sunni Endowment of Akkar. Even Shia contacts of the Embassy praised the trip. All felt it important that the Embassy show interest in the situation of Akkar. End comment.
MURRAY